

# TUE GREENFORT

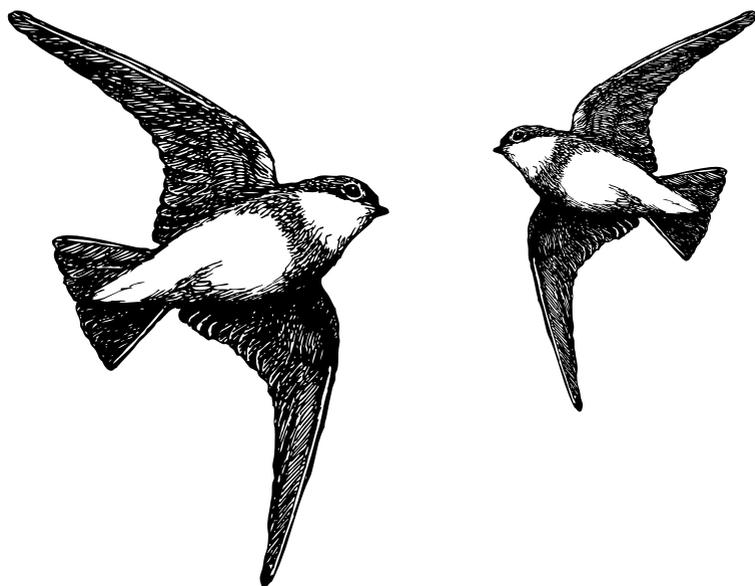
---

## *THE FEEDER CANAL SAND MARTIN COLONY*

---

FEEDER CANAL, NEAR NETHAM LOCK, BRISTOL, 2012

---



---

*Commissioned by*

**Foreground**

FOR BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL'S ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM PROGRAMME

---

*IT IS NOT ABOUT THE BIRDS ONLY -  
THINKING OF THE ENTIRE SITUATION.*

BY LAURA MANSFIELD

---

*Published by*  
Foreground  
The Old Church School  
Butts Hill  
Frome  
Somerset  
BA11 1HR

[www.foregroundprojects.org.uk](http://www.foregroundprojects.org.uk)

ISBN: 978-0-9567002-2-3

*Publication edited by*  
Tabitha Clayson & Simon Morrissey

*Text*  
© Laura Mansfield

*Images of artworks*  
© Jamie Woodley & the artist

*Design by*  
Daren Newman at Me & My Pen

*Printed by*  
Doveton Press Ltd

*All rights reserved. No part of this  
publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, transmitted in  
any form or by any means electronic,  
mechanical, including photocopying,  
recording or otherwise, without  
the prior permission in writing by  
the publishers.*

---

Entire situation means – all of the viewing experience, including the beholder’s body. There is nothing within his field of vision – nothing that he takes note of in any way – that is irrelevant to the situation, and therefore to the experience in question. On the contrary, for something to be perceived at all is to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts.<sup>1</sup>

*MICHAEL FRIED “ART AND OBJECTHOOD” 1967*

---

In his two most recent public art commissions Tue Greenfort has created projects that explore the bird life of the cities of Cologne and Bristol. The city of Cologne is home to a colony of Alexandra parakeets, an invasive species that have made nests amongst the plane trees of the city’s parks. Having made their homes in Cologne for well over forty years, these birds have become a regular feature of the parkland, gathering on trees in large groups and filling the area with their noisy chatter. For a commission with the German railway company Deutsche Bahn, Greenfort developed the project *NeoBiota*. The title references the biological phenomena designating the parakeet’s situation; a compound of the ancient Greek neos, new, and bios, life, *NeoBiota* names the occurrence of species inhabiting environments that are new or foreign to their previously known habitat. Indeed, the Alexandra parakeet is a species indigenous to Australia. The European population has most likely grown from birds that were originally bought as pets and then subsequently escaped or were set free.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto cited in Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’ Candlin, Fiona and Guins, Rainford ed. *The Object Reader* (Oxford: Routledge2009), p. 312.



---

For the development of the commission Greenfort worked with a biologist and a technology company to devise a series of surveillance cameras that could be placed inside the parakeet's nests. The installed cameras not only monitor the behaviour of the birds, sensing their movement and recording their nesting habits, but feed images to large projection screens in Cologne's central station. Footage of the nesting birds accompanies commuters as they move along the busy station causeway. In addition to the projected images Greenfort has recorded the sounds of the parakeet colony, the noise of which is disseminated throughout the station. The rhythms, movement and noise of commuters is accompanied by the alternative rhythms, patterns and sounds of the nesting birds. The exterior environment, a habitat populated by the parakeets, infiltrates the interior station site.

For his commission with Foreground in Bristol, Greenfort worked with a specialist fabricator to construct a roost for a small colony of sand martins that are using certain areas along the city's Feeder Canal to nest. A protected and migratory bird, the sand martin travels to the UK throughout the summer months to breed. Originally making nests in sandy riverbanks the sand martin has adapted to roost in structures that are not part of its known habitat, recalling the neobiota phenomena. Along the Feeder Canal, an area that cuts to the east of Bristol city centre, journeying through parkland, housing estates and industrial warehouses, sand martins have been observed using drilled boreholes under a bridge that abuts the waterway as readymade nests. Working with a site that the sand martins have previously but sporadically used for breeding, Greenfort's constructed roost presents an attempt to both increase the current colony size and demonstrate the adaptive nature of the species.



---

Mirroring the bird's appropriation of readymade structures as nest sites, Greenfort has constructed the roost from an old shipping container. Greenfort's adaptation of the shipping container further invites a connection between the migratory journey of the birds and the unknown global trade route the container has previously voyaged. A well-travelled object, the container seems to be a pertinent choice for the migratory birds, perhaps echoing something of their navigational patterns across different expanses of ocean.

However, when looked upon in detail, *NeoBiota* and *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* quickly extend beyond their seeming subject matter of the nesting birds. The immediate focus on the birds becomes the first point of a series of expansive concerns and wider problematics. Indeed, despite both the mentioned projects shared emphasis on birdlife, Greenfort is quick to point out that his works are not 'about the birds only'.

Throughout his practice Greenfort utilises natural habitats and biological sciences as a means to draw attention to contemporary human structures as well as their influence, damage and shaping of the natural world. For example, the colony of Alexandra parakeets in Cologne is part of a larger mass of rose ringed parakeets in the city. The abundance of the birds has recently been at the centre of a number of debates around concerns over noise and damage to property, with the parakeets creating mess and loud disturbances around the trees they choose to gather in. The debates have centered over the foreign and invasive traits of the species, uncomfortably echoing concerns over immigration and the rights of foreign nationals. The strategies of the council and private companies to 'move birds on', through high pitched alarms and the cutting down of certain trees presents further damage to the local habitat, raising questions over the longer term environmental benefits of the approach. Such an approach questions our attitude towards wildlife in the city and the development of systems to manage, contain and control different habitats.



---

Greenfort's work situates itself at the heart of this debate. Rather than focusing on a discussion that reverts to an idea of the natural in opposition to the cultivated and managed, Greenfort's intervention seeks to present solutions that transcend, or at least put into question, the dichotomies of the natural and the cultural. Within such a paradigm perceptions of what is 'original' and 'native', 'local' or 'foreign' are put into flux. The starting point for any such approach lies in the understanding of nature as fundamentally constructed. As historian Simon Sharma explains, "Nature, this place where the wild animal springs from is a carefully constructed phenomena. It is difficult to think of a single natural system that has not, for better or worse, been substantially modified by human culture.....It is coeval with writing, with the entirety of our social existence, and it is this universally modified world, from the polar caps to the equatorial forest, that is all the nature we have"<sup>2</sup>.

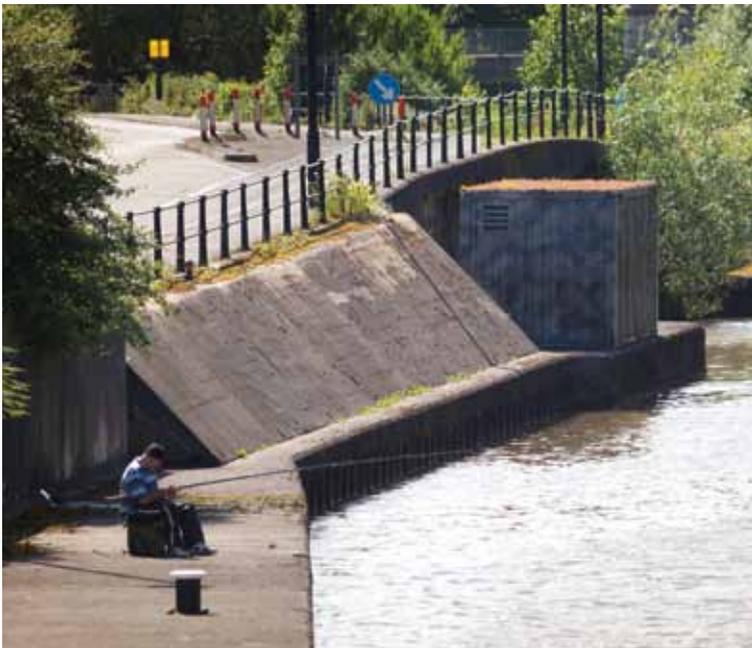
By highlighting the dwellings of the Alexandra parakeets and sand martin colonies Greenfort invites us to consider more closely the life of birds as imbedded within anthropocentric perceptions of contemporary city living. Rather than foregrounding a division between the human and the animal, the natural and the cultural, Greenfort prompts us to recognise ourselves as being one facet within interweaving systems of interspecies habitats. In viewing a work by Greenfort, we are invited to view the entire situation in which we find ourselves: the surrounding sound and movement, rhythms and actions of human and animal life in the diverse habitats of the site. For example, in observing the *Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* Greenfort invites us to consider the birds nesting place within the larger context of its surroundings: the canal, the housing estate, the parkland and the industrial warehouses serving as a backdrop to the roost. Each of these sites is home to a diverse number of different species and organisms. The public space of the work is a shared and contested interspecies site.



---

<sup>2</sup>Shama, Simon, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), pp.6-7.



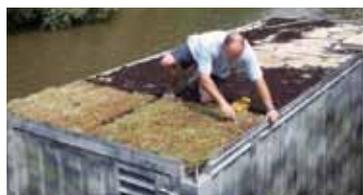


From an art historical perspective, Greenfort's work recalls sculptural developments from minimalism to site-based practices and relational aesthetics. The American minimalist sculptor Richard Serra famously declared that "the biggest break in the history of sculpture in the twentieth century occurred when the pedestal was removed"<sup>3</sup>, shifting sculptural works from their traditional position on a raised plinth to sharing the ground with an audience. A movement off the plinth brings the sculptural into a relationship with the physical body of the audience member and into the 'expanded field' of its surroundings. In relation to *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony*, by inviting us to contemplate the sculptural work Greenfort immediately draws us into the surrounding life of its context - it is not solely the structure of the roost that we contemplate, but the 'expanded field' of the work and our place within it.

The historical movement of artworks into the context of the viewer is further contextualized in the work of Nicholas Bourriaud and his definition of art practices that developed in the 1990s as relational aesthetics. For Bourriaud relational art practices attempted to create new spaces or sites of interaction and social engagement that break with the isolated experience of traditional art viewing. Although heavily critiqued, Bourriaud's coining of the term relational art presented an attempt at marking out the development of a growing number of contemporary practices that were situating themselves within a temporal and discursive realm, describing relational art to be "An art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context"<sup>4</sup>. In the context of Greenfort's practice a social context can, by extension, be conceived of as not solely a human arena but an area that includes the diverse organisms of the surrounding habitat.

<sup>3</sup> Serra, Richard Writings, Interviews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) p.141

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Relational Aesthetics' reproduced in Bishop, Claire ed Participation. Documents of Contemporary Art (London; MIT Press, 2006), p.160.



---

The placing of artworks within such contested and shared sites reflects considerations of our conception of nature, the ‘natural world’, and our relationship to different animal species. Our perception and understanding of different species forms part of a series of taxonomic and linguistic structures that often serve to mark out divisions and hierarchies between the animal and human. The words ‘animal’ and ‘human’ have come to connote dichotomies, points of difference permitting and explaining the segregation and dominance of man over nature. However, rather than reflecting such a dichotomy Greenfort places his work within a site where the entire situation is of importance, the different flora, fauna, bird and animal life amongst the cultural and industrial activities of the city.

In his most recent work for *Documenta 13* Greenfort has developed an archive of material documenting artists’ works that involve different species - from Joseph Beuys’ performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* to the contemporary work of Mark Wilson and Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir.

The archive, titled *The Worldly House* is dedicated to feminist theorist Donna Haraway. *The Worldly House* functions as a space of concentrated thought, centered upon questions of human relationships to animals. In the book *When Species Meet*, Haraway suggests any species is a multi species crowd<sup>5</sup>, that we are bound together in the world, as both messmates and partners. We are each made up of thousands of organic and nonorganic forms, containing an immense number of messmates not only in the environment that surrounds us but also within the confines of our own body. Haraway’s proposition invites contemplation of ourselves as always being located and related within larger and more complex milieux. Encountering *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* we find ourselves similarly placed: our body standing in the midst of, and permeated by, multiple intersecting habitats.

---

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, Donna *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2008)



---

Further considering *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony*, it is impossible not to discuss the size and weight of the structure. Having used a recycled shipping container to form the primary form of the roost, *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* stands with a sculptural weight echoing the rectilinear forms of the industrial warehouses adjoining the site. Despite its physical presence, treated with a camouflaged paint technique the container subtly rests within the surrounding landscape. Devoid of a plinth, far from a museum, the structure does not obviously declare itself as a sculptural form but rather absorbs itself into the context of the site and its functional role as a nesting site for the migratory birds. As a functional structure that rests within the local landscape a number of questions arise as to how we conceive of the work. Is it a sculpture? Is it an environmental building project? Is it a participatory artwork? Or does it rest within and between all of these categories, questioning each?

In his essay *The Murmur of Site* architect Raphael Moneo talks about the site as the first material in construction. Not simply the ground upon which to build, Moneo comments that “the site is always expectant, awaiting the arrival of an event that will allow it to play an active role”<sup>6</sup>. In devising *The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* Greenfort has activated the site, a space perhaps previously un-noticed, yet an area that was starting to play an important role in the development of Bristol’s sand martin population. Having been activated through the development of the project the site has become a space that opens up and fosters debates around environmental and social concerns that defy the dichotomies of nature and culture and undoes the perceived hierarchies and divisions of human and animal habitat relations.

---

<sup>6</sup> Moneo, Raphael ‘The Murmur of Site’, *Anywhere* (Any corporation MIT Press: New York, 1992)

# SPECIES OBSERVATION RECORD

---

Date & Time

---

Location

---

Habitat

---

Weather

---

Birds observed

*(appearance, gender, flock size)*

---

Behaviour

*(sights, sounds, activities)*

---



---

## *Project Credits*

Tue Greenfort  
The Feeder Canal Sand Martin  
Colony, 2012  
Feeder Road, Near Netham Lock,  
Bristol

*Commissioned by*  
Foreground for Bristol City Council

For further information on  
Bristol's programme of art in the  
public realm see [www.aprb.co.uk](http://www.aprb.co.uk)

*Curated and produced by*  
Tabitha Clayson & Simon Morrissey  
Project Assistant, Claire Sharpe

*Funded by*  
Barratt Homes through Bristol City  
Council's Art in the Public Realm  
Programme, with additional funding  
from Visiting Arts.



---

## *Thanks*

The curators would like to thank Aldo Rinaldi, Senior Public Art Officer for his support and vision; Daren Newman at Me & My Pen for his sensitive design of this publication; Laura Mansfield for her insightful text; Lloyd Turner for bringing his special combination of environmental and engineering expertise to the design and fabrication of the roost; Theresa Wheatcroft and Bob Haycock from Barratt Homes for their support throughout the project; Eric Dougall, Stacey Hobbs and Tony Nichols from Bristol Harbour Authority for all their help and ongoing support for the project.

Thanks is also due to Phil Quinn, Ecologist, Richard Bland, Ornithologist, Carl McClure, Strategic Planning, Bristol City Council, The Friends of Netham Park, Barton Hill History Group and Ed Drewitt, Naturalist & Broadcaster for their particular support and involvement during the artist's research period and the many members of the local community who shared their ideas with the artist and curators at the talks and presentations during this period.

Finally, thanks to the artist for his sensitivity and dedication shown throughout the process of creating and producing the artwork.

---

---

Tue Greenfort is interested in an expanded notion of ecology, encompassing cultural history and politics as well as natural resources, that he deploys to create critical constructions that comment on contemporary human social structures.

*The Feeder Canal Sand Martin Colony* uses materials derived from and drawing attention to its immediate environment, turning a disused shipping container into a fully functioning sand martin roost for an overlooked area of Bristol's urban landscape.

In providing a habitat for this protected migratory bird species, Greenfort subtly questions contemporary society's systems of regulation and consumption.

## Foreground

[www.foregroundprojects.org.uk](http://www.foregroundprojects.org.uk)

---